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ABSTRACT

Noting that even a cursory examination of curricula at the K-12 and postsecondary levels reveals a prolonged crisis of Chicano representation in the liberal arts, this paper considers how literature and history can be linked productively through a practice of critical cultural studies, one that places the poetics of these discursive forms in dialogue with one another. While the focus is on the Chicana/o experience, the paper suggests that the method of analysis is broadly applicable and advocates an approach that is simultaneously interdisciplinary and inter- and intra-cultural. It examines the literature of people of Mexican descent in the United States as they have chosen to represent their past through "factual" and "fictional" narratives. It concludes by discussing efforts to realize a cultural studies praxis and by offering considerations on methodology. (BT)

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Chicano Cultural Studies as Historiography:
Literature as History, History as Literature, and Cultural Poetics
by Louis Mendoza
The University of Texas at San Antonio
World History Conference, Austin, TX (2/12/2000)

> *The passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history.*[1]

A necessary starting point for my presentation today is to make the obvious point that for Chicanos and other U.S. Latinos the project of historical recuperation and revision continues to be a matter of urgency. Even a cursory examination of curriculum at the K-12 and post-secondary levels reveals that there is a prolonged crisis of representation in the liberal arts—and this is perhaps most evident in the intimately related fields of history and literature. It's important to say as well that the recovery and revision of history and literature often reflects the political exigencies of the context from which they emerge. Moreover, these discursive formations are often looked to as a mobilizing ideological force for social and cultural change. That is, we look to the past to make sense of today and to chart a course for the future.

What I want to do today is offer in broad strokes my thoughts on how literature and history can be productively linked through a practice of critical cultural studies, one which places the poetics of these discursive forms in dialogue with one another. Most of my comments today are grounded in an analysis of the historical dimensions of literature and the literary dimensions of the historical. While my work focuses on the Chicana/o experience, I believe the method of analysis I offer is broadly applicable. What I'm advocating is an approach that is simultaneously interdisciplinary and inter- and intra-cultural.

My work challenges conventional notions of the relationship between historical and literary narratives by examining the literature of people of Mexican descent in the United States as they have chosen to represent their past through "factual" and "fictional" narratives. I read "imaginative" literature "against the grain" of political histories written by Chicano historians. My method exposes the tendency of history to present Chicano culture monolithically. Creative literature, I argue, enables readers to better see the role culture plays as an historical force, one that is often disregarded in historical narratives that are shaped by approaches to the past which privilege particular sites and terrains of social contestation. Imaginative reconstructions of daily life examine the particulars of identity formation as they are shaped by ritual, emotional relations, spiritual beliefs, and relations of power outside of the traditional domain of political and economic relations.

Many studies by historians and literary critics of Chicana/o culture and politics are involved in critical revisionist projects which critique widely accepted analytical paradigms. My work is motivated by the same critical impulse, but looks at the limitations and contradictions of revisionist studies that also reproduce what Gayatri Spivak has called cognitive gaps or historical blind spots.

As a point of departure, let's take a brief look at two poems by Teresa Palomo Acosta, an Austin based poet. Both of these are provocative examples of the intersection between the imagined and the historical. In "Preguntas y frases para una abuela española," Acosta explores her complex cultural history—her relationship to her Spanish and Amerindian *antepasadas*. Separated by time, different cultural and linguistic practices, as well as a different relationship to the ruling class, the poet finds it difficult to imagine her Spanish heritage. This difficulty is articulated in the opening lines. However much she

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[1] Pierre Nora. (15).

identifies with her indigenous heritage, the poet also knows she is marked both genetically and linguistically by her "Spanish" inheritance. This recognition is rife with ambivalence. Disinherited from her past because of colonial racism, she does not know whether her knowledge of Spaniards is based on stereotypes or fact. Nor does she know the relationship to power that her grandmother maintained, though she can identify two possible attitudes that a Spanish woman might hold toward indigenous women. She asks:

> Were you haughty and arrogant?
> Ready to do in *la india* clutched by *el soldado español*
> As he crossed your path?
> Or did you also hide from him
> In a corner of your *hacienda?*

Aware that the strongest possibility for reconciliation with her Spanish heritage is shared experience, she considers that not all Spanish women were complicit in the subjugation of indigenous peoples, especially because they, too, suffered under colonial patriarchal relations. In this poem Acosta re-creates the possibility of alliance between indigenous and "elite" women. This imagined alliance allows her to address the stereotypes about Mexicans in the U.S. held by Spanish and Mexican elites in order "To set some crooked things en nuestra historia/ At least at a slant,/ if not straight," between them. It is this "writing" of historical wrongs that is at the heart of Acosta's poetics.[2]

As is exemplified in this poem, much of Acosta's poetry addresses specific historical female antecedents; therefore it is instructive to examine the meaning of history for this poet who disagrees with a monolithic construction of history produced by both mainstream and Chicano (male) historians. Acosta's poetry links her present day reality to the past, and in doing so contributes to the documentation of the history of women of Mexican descent.

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[2] For an excellent extended reading of this poem, see Sheila Contreras's essay "Re-Reading 'the Historical Facts of Descent': Teresa Palomo Acosta's Questions to a Spanish grandmother." *Reflexiones*. Austin: UT Austin CMAS, 1998.

Informed by what is lacking in written histories, many of her other poems challenge textbook history. I use Acosta's writings and the creative work of other authors to facilitate a re-reading of Chicano historical texts. Acosta's poetry turns to the past to re-configure our understanding of the present. In the second poem," the "failure" of both official history and Chicano history is located in the unspoken stories of men who were not disabled by betrayal, defeat, or nostalgia. "For Maximo Palomo" works against one of the primary principles of the written history of Mexican people in the Southwest, the resistance narrative. For Acosta, this history is not inaccurate, but inadequate and incomplete. There are other narratives, other modes of survival that she wants to document. She is particularly interested in recreating and foregrounding women's voices, which are often absent in historical texts.[3] And since the field of Chicano history has been dominated by male historians, she identifies the failings of history in their single-minded perspective that privileges male resistance against agents and agencies of domination. In this poem she points to the way resistance narratives have contributed to limited notions about manhood. The tender and loving father who "cradled children to sleep,/ soothed their damp hair,/ told them stories," played music, and laughed is another absent figure that falls victim to the "Great Man" approach to Chicano history.

Acosta has no lack of appreciation for important historical moments. Like this one, many of her poems include footnotes that state historical facts, but for her, historical dates need to be kept in check and not allowed to become the only lens through which we understand the past. In their inability or unwillingness to find historical value in models of manhood that do not fit the resistance paradigm, many Chicano historians have posited limited notions about the relationship between culture and resistance. The deconstruction of

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[3]For examples of these poems, see "Chipita," "About Emma Tenayuca and the Pecan Shellers," "My Mother Pieced Quilts,"

male resistance narratives that pervade Acosta's poetry provide a critical lens through which we may examine "factual" and "imagined" narratives of the Chicano Movement in relation to one another.

The status of history in studies of Chicana/o literature varies depending on the national history it is measured against. On the one hand, when placed in relation to traditionally sanctioned narratives of the U.S., Chicana/o literature is often perceived as presenting a counter-narrative that functions as a corrective to the effaced or misrepresented history of Mexicans in the United States. In these cases, as Ramón Saldívar has noted, history is the narrative battleground upon which the literature is based--the writing and re-writing of Chicano history thus becomes an important subtext of the literature. In most Chicana/o literary criticism, Chicana/o historical narratives are integrated uncritically into an analysis of the literature to establish a context or background for reading. In these cases Chicana/o historical writings are invoked as a representation of the "real," a presentation of historical facts as counter-narrative, which is intended to merely complement or substantiate the imaginative subject matter of literature. This use of history merely reinforces a polarity in which history is seen as "factual truth" and literature as "imaginary." In both instances, historical works serve as secondary sources in Chicana/o literary criticism to enable a revisionist critique of U.S. history and culture.

Lost in many Chicano counter-narratives is a critical approach to intra-cultural relations. I argue that seeing literature as valid historical evidence enables a new way of conceptualizing the nature of power and its negotiation with more complexity and accuracy; bringing the literary and the historical in dialectical relation to one another promotes an interpretive practice that enables the reader to imagine possibilities for

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"Home," and "A Song of Maria Martinez." No extensive examination of Acosta's poetry exists at the present time.

intervention and produce new strategies for social change. I also argue that seeing history as a literary genre is similarly enabling--while there is a different and necessary relationship to "truth" and facts--*how* we make history, as well as *what* we consider worthy of making into history, is continually revised according to what we deem important.

A different understanding of history is created when literary narratives are read against historical narratives. Not coincidentally, I argue, is that fact that master (counter)narratives of resistance are written by males. In general, these grand master narratives provide a synthesis of pre-existing work and thus carry with them the biases, blind spots, and limitations of early work; most significantly they do not adequately address women's history. Chicana historians have refused to embrace this patriarchal mode; instead they have consistently chosen to conduct focused, discrete studies of particular sites, many of which rely on oral histories—thus giving primacy to female self-representation.

Inasmuch as Chicano literature also narrates the historical experiences of Mexican men and women in the U.S., it offers us yet another way of imaginatively reconstructing historical, cultural and social relations. In its attention to the production of meaning in everyday life, Cultural Studies and Ethnic Studies practitioners have examined the distinctions between official and unofficial cultural practices and discourses.

Why Cultural Studies?

What, then, can an "against the grain" reading of literary and historical texts gain us? What sectors of the community experience have been privileged by historians and why? What sites of power are being ignored? Who occupies those arenas? Even in a framework that examines resistance, what limitations to our understanding of a people are produced by privileging certain forms of resistance over others?

One advantage of a cultural studies approach to literary analysis is to foreground gender as a category of analysis. An insistence on the role of gender in narrative and analytical paradigms can potentially alter disciplinary paradigms of study because it opens up new avenues of inquiry by giving voice and value to "personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities" (82). What this means is that women's literature and women's history shift the grounds of discussion about the past and can alter and complicate our understanding of it. The privileging of a resistance paradigm in early Chicano counter histories, to the exclusion and underdevelopment of others, has posited limited notions of power, violence and resistance; consequently, this has depreciated or denied the role of women in politics, inhibited an analysis of the family as a gendered site of social power and maintained a focus on institutions and practices which, through *de facto* or *de jure* segregation, excluded women's participation.

Reading disciplinary texts against the grain of one another contrasts two different ways of transmitting knowledge, culture and beliefs about relations of power. Can literature help in recovering the political/social history of Chicanos without distorting it or reducing it to "mere" fiction? Can it render history differently, that is more complexly, than "history" can? What can it add? Is it better able to capture the nuances of intercultural relations and intracultural conflict?

I argue that teachers and scholars must recognize the ways in which historical and literary narratives complement, contradict and complicate one another, with the intent of altering our prior understanding of the past for the insight that such a reconstruction can offer to the present moment. Utilizing cultural studies as a mode of literary analysis offers insight into other sites and circuits of power, which expose the "imaginative" aspects of history and illustrate the historical dimensions of myth. Related to the central

concern of this investigation of the relationship between history and literature is an important and as yet unarticulated question: How does a community retain its collective history and memory? Does, in fact, such a thing as collective historical memory exist? In an essay entitled "Between Memory and History" Pierre Nora claims that "memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary. These have run parallel to each other but until now always separately. At present the boundary between the two is blurring . . ." (24). Another answer to this question might be arrived at by considering the relationship between the social function of history and what that function tells us about its construction and the paradigms used to fulfill that function. This exploration should account for less official forms of retaining history, such as individual and communal memories: myth, legend, folklore and song. Memory, though embedded in both the historical and the literary, has a contestatory relationship to history. Historians are suspicious of memory's accuracy and subjectivity.

By way of conclusion, I will discuss my efforts to realize a cultural studies praxis.

- Cultural Studies Praxis:
    - empowerment through oral histories and recuperation, validation, and preservation of experience. Brief discussion on examples of work on neighborhood arts, cantinas, and prison literature.
    - Distribute and discuss copies of *El Placazo*, a San Antonio neighborhood newspaper.
- More generally, and much more challenging has been my effort to conceptualize and practice a working model for cultural studies, one that is not grounded in any singular disciplinary approach, not dependent on high theory, and one in which the flow of knowledge is from the ground up--a dynamic in which the so-called "informants" in an anthropological model are "mentors" who lend their credibility to projects because a relationship of trust has been established and they believe their insights will not be misrepresented or misinterpreted. A cooperative and collaborative relationship ensures that any given project will be self-affirming

and facilitate the continuation of community intellectuals work and ideas by broadening the audience for their cultural production .

On Methodology: It's important to:

- Be aware of the history of abuse of authoritative / ethnographic discourses.
- Develop or earn a relationship of trust
- Seek narratives rather than confirmation of a hypothesis; realize that role is to contextualize their stories and recognize that not all stories are easily reconcilable.
- Be open to multiple forms of production—ones that serve the needs of popular *and* academic audiences (video, scholarly, illustrated books, etc.)

Works Cited

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FOR MAXIMO PALOMO*
by Teresa Palomo Acosta

the official history that
traces in pictures and words,
endlessly depicts
in minute detail
the stealing of your honor
the selling of your manly labor,
the pain you endured
as sons and daughters
drifted from you,
met their death in the
hour of thorns and swords
will fail you

just as will history texts
written with the cutting pen of
palefaced brown/stone men who recall 1848
and
forget to tell about
the man who cradled children to sleep,
soothed their damp hair,
told them stories,
played la golondrina on his violin,
and laughed
aloud
at dusk.

Note: The United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, thus ending the Mexican American War.

* Originally published in Passing Time (1984).